

# Charter schools point to test scores as they lobby lawmakers to save their schools

Mid-year progress report offer by supporters

Charters surviving temporarily with combination of reduced state funds, private dollars

Eyes on Olympia for a permanent solution

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A student peers outside the front door Sept. 9 of Summit Olympus High School in Tacoma, one of three charter schools in Tacoma. All three schools are currently lobbying for the state to realow them. David Montesino Staff photographer

By Debbie Cafazzo  
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Tacoma's charter school operators say their staff and students are sticking with them, despite a September ruling from the Washington State Supreme Court that declared the state charter school law unconstitutional and cut state funding to the schools.

Neither of the two Summit schools in Washington has lost teachers because the court ruling, said Jen Wickens, chief regional officer for Summit Public Schools.

The California-based charter management organization opened Summit Olympus High School in Tacoma and Summit Sierra High School in Seattle at the start of the school year.

Wickens and two other charter leaders — Bree Dusseault, state director at Green Dot Public Schools, which operates Destiny Charter Middle School in Tacoma, and Tom Franta, CEO of the Washington State Charter Schools Association — met last week with News Tribune editors.

They offered a mid-year progress report on how charter schools are doing and talked about support for a bill before the state Legislature that could restore full public funding to the charters.

Franta said “a handful” of charter teachers around the state have jumped ship, but said most of the losses came because teachers decided charters weren’t a good fit for them.

“I’m not aware of a single loss due to the court action,” he said.

“Our entire faculty is super-committed to every child they’re serving,” Wickens added.

At the start of the school year, nine Washington charter schools had enrolled an estimated 1,200 students. Enrollment statewide has dropped to about 1,100, Franta said.

The court ruling cut state funding that had been available under the voter-approved charter law, sending charter schools on a dash for operating cash. Private donors, including the Gates Foundation, stepped up.

Franta estimates his association has distributed about \$6 million in grants to charters to make up for state funding losses. And he said the fund raising is continuing.

One charter school, First Place Scholars in Seattle, converted back to its previous status as a private school, serving mostly homeless children.

Two Tacoma charters — SOAR Academy and Green Dot’s Destiny — opted to stay open under the state’s Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) model, contracting with the small Mary Walker School District in Eastern Washington.

ALE programs receive per-pupil state funding, just over \$6,000 per student. Mary Walker retains a portion for administrative fees, then passes the remainder along to the charters.

Summit’s two high schools bypassed ALE state funding, and instead opted to register their students as home-schoolers who receive services from the Summit schools, now recast as “tutoring centers.”

Wickens said it's a stopgap measure until state lawmakers come up with a new funding mechanism for charters that will meet the court's standards.

At the halfway mark in the school year, Summit and Green Dot are reporting positive gains for students reflected in just-released test scores. Students at SOAR Academy still are in the testing process, so no scores were released for that school.

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Jen Wickens, chief regional officer for Summit Public Schools

Summit reports that on the nationally norm-referenced Measures of Academic Progress test, Tacoma's Summit Olympus students:

- More than doubled the national average growth in reading and more than tripled the national average growth in math.
- Placed in the top third of schools in the nation in terms of math growth.

The growth occurred even though nearly half of Summit Olympus students entered school in the fall an average of four years below grade-level in reading and math, Summit officials said.

At Destiny Charter Middle School, officials report:

- 80 percent of students started the school year reading below grade level. But in three months, more than a third of students grew a grade level or two on the nationally normed Scholastic Reading Inventory.
- 30 percent of students left the school's math intervention program by the start of the second semester.

Charters also tout their commitment to diversity. Statewide, Franta said, more than 70 percent of charter kids are students of color, and at least 70 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, a marker for poverty.

He said the positive test scores are "a result of what happens when a support structure is in place."

He and others hope that structure will remain intact and gain full funding support from the Legislature. They have pinned their hopes on a bill that has passed through the Republican-controlled state Senate (SB 6194), but now faces a rougher ride in the state House, with a majority of Democrats.

The bill would remove language in the charter school law that defined charters as “common schools” eligible for state dollars under that heading.

It also would derive charter funding from a different source, the Washington Opportunity Pathways Account, which is funded by the state lottery.

As of Friday, the bill was scheduled for a public hearing by the state House Education Committee on Feb. 19.

All three Tacoma charter schools are accepting applications for next year.

House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, said early in the legislative session he is not sure the Senate bill would pass constitutional muster, because charter schools still would be run by non-elected boards. That was a major sticking point in the court ruling.

Chopp has said consistently that he favors an approach that would place charter schools under the umbrella of public school boards and districts as alternative programs.

Students at charter schools across the state are sending Valentine’s Day postcards to lawmakers this week, asking them to “show some love” for their schools. Tacoma charter students plan to travel to Olympia later this month for a rally.

As the lobbying continues, all three of Tacoma’s charters remain optimistic. They are enrolling students now for next year.

“We are accepting applications for next year, and being honest with parents about where we are,” Wickens said. “We are hopeful that the Legislature will do the right thing.”

*Staff writer Melissa Santos contributed to this report.*

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